

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

Theory and practice of Pilgrimage in Hinduism

This is a pre print version of the following article:

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1632650> since 2017-05-02T15:08:56Z

Terms of use:

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

Theory and practice of Pilgrimage in Hinduism

Introduction- The vedic roots

Epic and puranic sources

The treatises (bandha)

Sacred fords (titha)

Mental sacred fords (manasatitha)

Fields (ksetra)

Pilgrimage to sacred places (tithayatra)

Replacement pilgrimage

Interior disposition

Macrocosm and microcosm

Preparation and goals

Meetings (kumbhamela)

Circuits (parikrama)

Introduction- The vedic roots

The vedic roots of the *bandha* practice of pilgrimage are to be traced first of all within the „gveda where the key term *titha* is to be found in a certain number of occurrences, both with the general meaning 'way', 'passage', and with the specific meaning 'ford', particularly 'sacred ford', a place where a river can be waded across by foot, a natural place for meeting during seasonal festivals. This is probably the ancient origin of the practice of pilgrimage, the practice consisting in the meeting around the fords of rivers and creeks in order to celebrate a seasonal festival. In a monsonic climate the possibility to wade across a river is necessarily bound to the cycle of the seasons. The practice of merry meetings around the shores of rivers draws great crowds towards the rivers, being the source of rural subsistence, the source of the very possibility of one's own living. Within a sacerdotal text being bound to the *gveda* the *Aitareyabrahma*, we find an interesting aetiological myth explaining the origin of the practice of pilgrimage, the journey to sacred fords (tithayatra). Says the *Aitareyabrahma* (7, 33, 3 I quote from the old translation by Arthur Berriedale Keith, Harvard Oriental Series, London 1920): 'Manifold is the prosperity of him who is weary, / So have we heard, o Rohita; / Evil is he who stayeth among men, / Indra is th comrade of the wanderer. [f] Flowed like the heels of the wanderer, / His body groweth and is

fruitful, / All his sins disappear, / Slain by the toil of his journeying. [f] The fortune of him who sitteth also sitteth, / But that of him who standeth ~~standeth~~; / That of him who reclineth lieth down; / The fortune of him that moveth shall move indeed. •

Indra, the Vedic god of storm and king of the gods, is often represented ~~by his~~ by his bolt, the vajra. With it he breaks the dark clouds heavy with ~~water~~ and lets the rain to fall upon the earth impregnating it. The celestial waters are personified by ~~the~~ the Vajra, the asura Indra faces and defeats. Indra is also the symbol of the strenght of ~~Indras~~ the ancient indoeuropean invaders of the Indian subcontinent, he is the symbol of a nomadic civilization of cattle breeders, opposing to the sedentary agrarian model of the autochthonous civilization. It is not at all fortuituous that he is the ideal mate of the pilgrim, wandering through all ~~regions~~ regions of India.

Epic and puranic sources

One of the two main epic Indian poems, the Mahabharata, dedicates one of its minor books (3,36 crit.ed.) to the pilgrimage to sacred fords ~~(Setha)~~ of the Pundarikavas during their exile in the forest. The other one, the Ramayana, contains within its main plot the account of Rama's long and dangerous journey across the peninsular portion of the subcontinent in order to reach the island of Lanka, where his wife Sita has been brought by Ravana kidnapped her. But the importance of sacred places shows its real importance within the ancient stories. Manifold are the references to pilgrimage within puranic literature. Perhaps the most important source is the section about sacred fords ~~(Setha)~~ within the Skandapurana (4,1,6). Even the functions of pilgrimage are manifold: for the individual, the pilgrimage is a purificatory practice, sometimes a way towards salvation. From the collective point of view, pilgrimage is a powerful tool for the unification of Indian cultural world, firmly pursued by a number of imperial Indian dynasties as a mean for cultural validation. The mature result of this geopolitical conception of the practice of pilgrimage will be the so called replacement or substitute pilgrimage. From the individual perspective, the substitute pilgrimage allows to reach the very same goals of a real journey, with evident savings in terms of economic expense and of personal risks ~~(including the caravan routes and so on)~~. The political unification of Indian world is a dream that no imperial dynasty could ever really and effectively accomplish due to geopolitical reasons. But it could perhaps be possible to accomplish it in a symbolic intellectual way. The multiplication and reproduction of sacred places reciprocally recalling each other in a mirror's play (Kankas, Dakshin and so on) establishes a dense net of relationships, with the result of the reinforcement of the unity of the country through devotional practice.

Skanda, the son of Shiva, the god of war representing the male vigour of the young man just sorted out of puberty. His alternative nouns are Kumara (prince), Kartikeya (son of the Kartikeya), the seven sisters, his adoptive mother Sati, brahmanya (dear to priests). In the South of India he is venerated with the name of Murugan. His weapon is the spear, his vahana is the peacock. To him is dedicated the most bulky of the puranas (a lakh of stanzas), the Skandapurana. It is not at all fortuituous that this very sampradaya contains a section devoted to sacred fords. In effect the male vigour of the warrior, the main feature of this god, appears also in occasion of seasonal marauds. Seasonal marauds are, from the anthropological point of view, the aggressive alternative to the pacific practice of pilgrimage.

An important symbolic contrast is the juxtaposition during the siege to the contrast between a forest abiding group, refusing the comforts of urban life, and a refined urban community, represented respectively by the besiegers, the people of apes, and the besieged, the inhabitants of the capital of Lanka, ruled by Ravana. The warrior impetuosity of the first group is doomed to conquer the decaying stability of the second one. Perhaps we have here a hint of a memory of the Vedic deeds celebrating the powerful advancement of nomadic Indo-Aryan tribes, devoted to cattle breeding and to war, against the urban sites, defending them and sedentary autochthonous groups. The prevalence of migrant people against sedentary peoples could eventually be symbolized in the very practice of pilgrimage, that is a programmed migration, focused on religious goals.

The treatises (nibandha)

After the ancient renowned treatises (śāstra), mainly Gautama's *Yadharmaśāstra* (Dharmaśāstra), Arthaśāstra, the most important sources about pilgrimage are the late medieval treatises (nibandha), first of all the *Kṛtyakalpataru* (Creeper of desires of what has to be done) by Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara (XIII century CE), containing a specific section, *Tīrthavivekanakāṇḍa* (section about the sacred fords), the *Tīrthālistetu* (bridge to the three places) by Nityānanda (XVIth century CE) and the *Vaṛamitrodaya* (section *Tīrthaprakāśa* (Light of the sacred fords) by Mitrāmīśra (XVIIth century CE) and the *Tīrtharatnākara* by Anandabhaṭṭa (XVIIth century CE). The glorification of sacred places, *śrīrāmā*, is expressed in the treatises in normative terms, prescribed as a highly praiseworthy practice. A lot of aetiological myths are narrated, in order to trace the Vedic roots and the purificatory virtues of this laudatory practice. The enthusiastic descriptions of the purāṇas are organized into a systematic worldview, a general outlook well identifiable in the rich variety of its coexistent taxonomies. Further, we cannot overlook a number of sources alien to the tradition, for example, the travel memories by Al-Biruni (XIth century CE) and by Abu'l Fazl (XVIth century CE). Finally an important category of sources is represented by a lot of anonymous booklets, easy to be found in any sacred place: they correspond to present day tourist guides, and are a precious source of informations about specific sites.

The *nibandhas* (collections) are a series of late medieval treatises collecting the main and subsidiary rules of the *śrīrāmā* tradition. The difference with the ancient treatises, *śāstras*, is as follows. *Śāstras* treat every aspect of civil and religious habits from a general perspective, whereas *nibandhas* treat specific aspects in depth, and above all are a precious source because they put in comparison a lot of normative ancient sources, many of them being in their original form.

Sacred fords (tīrtha)

A *tīrtha* etimologically a ford, is a sacred place being able to ferry the devotee to the other shore of the deep and swirling ocean of transmigration (*samsāra*), in order to reach the other side, that is the emancipation (*mokṣa*). *Tīrthas* can be divided in different categories, according to two different taxological principles. The first classification includes three main types: 1) *Emotionless* sacred places (*ahimsa*), sacred fords, sacred fields (*śrīrāmā*), grouping together a number of fords), sacred confluences and mouths of rivers, sacred lakes and mountains; 2) *Sacred*

places (manasatirtha) symbolic interior places (we will see some of them immediately after); and finally 3) mobile sacred places (gamatirtha) that is some people being so full of virtue that they represent a sort of mobile tirthas. The second classification includes 1) divinitas tirthas being derived directly from the initiative of Brahm..., Viu or Eiva (respectively Pukara, Soman...tha, K...S%); 2) devitas derived from the conflict opposing gods and demons (devas and asuras) (for example Gaya, where Viu defeated the asura named Gaya); 3) tirthas of the seers (r, a), derived from the austerities practiced by semidivine seers (for example the forest of Naimi'a); and finally 4) human (anva) tirthas derived from the foundation of sacred places effected by the kings of one of the two main dynasties, the solar and the lunar dynasties. In the definition of atirtha a great role is played by symbolic features, in order to delineate a sort of sacred mythical geography, only partially identical with physical geography (the same is true for the symbolic physiology in the haayogaschools, not at all identical with the medical physiology of traditional India medicine).

Mental sacred fordsm (manasatirtha)

Some examples will be enough. A first typology is represented by physical places where the symbolic feature prevails over the geographical one. A second type is represented by entirely mental places, sites to be found only within our interior landscape.

Situated at the confluence between the G and the Yamun..., the city of Pray...ga (today, Allahabad) is one of the most venerated Indian tirthas. The devotees believe that in this site a third underground and therefore invisible river flows, the Sarasvati. For this reason the site is known as the starting point of the triple braid, the tress made by three threads.

The sacred place of Pukara, on the shore of the namesake lake near Ajmer (Rajasthan) contains the only Indian temple consecrated to the divine demiurge Brahm.... The reason why Brahm... does not receive ordinarily any form of adoration is as follows: he is responsible of the manifestation of our world. From a gnostic perspective, he is an inferior deity, due to the fact that the world is far from being a perfect product. The burden of the heavy griefs of every sort of living beings is too hard, because the world is surely not a pleasant place to stay for its temporary inhabitants. Every wise man will try to escape from it, choosing some sort of religious life being able to ensure him a refuge from the dire straits of earthly existence, and to grant him a safe shelter within the atemporal eternity of the divine.

According to the aetiological foundation myth of Pukara, in the old day Brahm... was practicing austerities keeping in his hand a lotus flower (pukara). Seeing the asura Vajranabha intentioned to put in danger the supremacy of the gods with his own austerities, the lotus fell from his hand, causing the death of Vajranabha. From this event the place took the name of Pukara. As is easy to see, the myth does not refer at all to the demiurgic role of Brahm..., this one being considered a negative feature, but to his ascetic practice, put in effect with the intent to hinder the everlasting effort of the asuras to win the supremacy over the gods. Brahm... in effect obtain privilege to receive adoration, and to found a site of pilgrimage, only because he forgot his own demiurgic function and adopts a behaviour more akin to his divine mission, that is to say, to efficaciously the evil represented by the asuras.

Mental sacred fords (m•nasat•rtha)

Purity of heart (vittuddhir manasā), truthfulness (satya), compassion (daya), forgiveness (kṣamā), control of the senses (indriyanigraha), are all moral qualities considered as mental sacred fords (m•nasat•rtha) in accordance with the principle according to which neither pilgrimage nor any sort of other virtuous practices (such as gift, sacrifice, asceticism, study or ritual purification) could ever be fruitful if they are undertaken without faith (śraddhā), without the firm resolution (saṅkalpa) to accomplish these virtuous acts according to the rules prescribed within the treatises. The purity of intention is the only effective guarantee that the ritual practice, accomplished according to outwardly prescribed rules, could ever be really efficacious. Purity of intention is the main mean to obtain the knowledge of the Supreme Lord, according to the devotional epistemology taught by Kṛtā in the Bhagavadgītā. Within our daily behaviour, the purity of intention appears as the firm resolution, being able to dispel the paralyzing hindrance of the doubt. The reflections about the mental sacred places show the importance of the interior dimension for ethical life: the practice of pilgrimage reveals itself as only apparent exterior behaviour. In effect the interior intention is its main feature, prevailing over the exterior praxis.

The glorification of faith as an essential prerequisite of every devotional practice is contained in some famous passages from the Bhagavadgītā, such as *yo yo yō yō tanuṣ bhakta \ tṛddhayaṣ citiṣ icchati | tasya tasyaṣ caṣ tṛddhaṣ \ t•m eva vidadh•my aham ||* 'Whatsoever (divine) form any devotee with faith seeks to worship, | for every such (devotee), faith unswerving\ I ordain that same to be||' (7,21, tr. Franklin Edgerton) and *yeṣ py anyadevat•bhakt• yajante tṛddhayaṣ nvi• teṣ pi m•m eva kaunteya yajanty avidhiprvakam ||* 'Even those who are devotees of other gods worship them permeated with faith, | it is only Me, son of Kunt%, that even their worship, (tho) not in the enjoined fashion (9,23).

The Bhagavadgītā is the main devotional text of Indian tradition. Contained within the Mahābhārata, it exposes in 18 lectures (adhyāya), the same number of the books of the poem, the same number of the duration of the war that is the poem's main plot, the dialogue where Kṛṇa solves Arjuna's doubts. Kṛṇa persuades Arjuna that action is preferable to inaction, and that it is possible to act without being polluted by any negative effects of our acts, provided that we act only moved by a compelling duty, not by the longing to enjoy the fruits of our own deeds.

The tight bond existing between Arjuna the warrior and his divine charioteer, Kṛṇa, is evident since the very names of both heroes, meaning respectively 'white' and 'black', they appear as reciprocally complementary: the one is inconceivable without the other. Their residences in it the whole universe, as is shown by their identification with the pair of twin peaks, just above the sanctuary of B...darik...Śrama, a well known site of pilgrimage. There they are venerated as Narāyaṇa (Arjuna) and N...r...tṛṇa (Kṛṇa), that is etymologically 'man' and 'man's shelter'.

Fields (kṣetra)

The individual tēthas are harmoniously included within more or less extended sacred complexes that take the name of 'fields' (kṣetra), each of them containing with exact

environmental matching parts (such as the presence of a river, of a mountain or hill, of specific botanic or animal species) all differ. ~~Earth~~ as a field is a replica on a wider scale of the sacred geography of the entire subcontinent. The mechanism effected by the replacement pilgrimage, according to which every single ~~Earth~~ of a ~~k,etra~~ is linked with all the others by a circuit or itinerary (*parikramā*), that pilgrims cover in a devotional mood, and that includes a ritual circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*) of the most sacred site of the complex, the goal of the entire journey. Each and every ~~kyetra~~ has within it a number of alternative itineraries, limited in space and time, according to different physical capacities of the pilgrims, and to their special capacities. The Bhagavadgītā calls ~~k,etra~~ the human body, because it is the object of knowledge of the individual conscious principle (*puruṣa*), the so-called ~~€knower of the field~~ (*k,etrajaṇa*). The analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, between the exterior field of the pilgrimage and the interior field of consciousness, is so evident in the best way.

We may define as interior landscape this harmonious mixture within the sphere of the sacred of places, times, meanings, rites and behaviours, in the fully aware attempt of a total levelling between the interior dimension of human microcosm and the exterior dimension of macrocosm, provisionally individuated in the site visited by the pilgrim. This identification takes place through the careful practice of a series of symbolic equivalences between the two levels of existences (microcosm and macrocosm). The goal of the practice is to overcome the split by recovering the original unity.

Pilgrimage to sacred places (*€(thay•tr•)*)

Pilgrimage to sacred places (*€(thay•tr•)*) in our time of secularization takes the name of religious tourism. It is a complex practice with multiple meanings; it involves risks and dangers; it has at least in principle to be accomplished by foot, or in a mood of sacrifice; it is a journey through space, through time (it is marked by a lot of mythical references), within the interior landscape of one's own soul: the pilgrim ~~souls~~ of it deeply transformed. It is organized in occasion of the main crowd meetings, it involves the relocation of masses of millions of individuals. Motivations to undertake a pilgrimage are various, they encompass the fulfillment of a vow, the simple desire to contemplate personally a famous icon within a sanctuary as its first solid prerequisite the firm intentions (*sankalpa*) to accomplish the journey according to the prescribed ritual rules. When the pilgrim reaches the goal of his journey, effects the expected ritual acts, bestows a gift to the keepers of the sanctuary, fully aware that a worship done within a sacred place is able to increase its intrinsic merits. From an interior perspective, *€(thay•tr•)* is a serious and deep process of transformation of the pilgrim. At the end of his journey, the pilgrim has effected a real rite of passage, passing through three different main stages: initiation (the purpose to undertake the venture), liminal state (the journey with all the risks involved in it), and reaggregation (the return to home, enriched with the experience due to the transformation involved).

The *pradakṣiṇā* or ritual circumambulation is a round course, effected keeping the object of devotion to one's own right, clockwise, with reference to the ~~sancta sanctorum~~, the ~~€home of the embryo~~ (*garbhagṛha*) of a temple, or to a sacred place (*€(thay•tr•)*), or to a cultural icon (*€(frti)*), or to a personality deign of veneration, for example a spiritual master (*€(guru)*, term that etymologically means ~~€heavy~~, because the master has a relevant role in the life of his disciples).

Pilgrimage is always related to ascetic practices, and we may even say that in a certain sense it is an alternative form of asceticism, more popular, less technical than the severe practices attested in the domain of yoga.

Pilgrimage is different from ascetic practices properly said, because it is mainly a collective activity, involving such behaviours as collective prayers, recitations and offerings and so on. On the other hand, ascetic practices are strictly individual: even though the trainees are collected in one and the same place, each one of them is concentrated in his own specific activity, be it a physical practice (āsana) or a meditative practice (dhyāna).

Replacement pilgrimage

Replacement pilgrimage is a practice not unknown to Western Christianity. With the institution of the various Sacred Mounts (a replica of the Calvario) in the Counter-Reformation period, the practice of replacement pilgrimage arises from the temporary inability for Christian pilgrims, for historical and political reasons, to visit the holy land of Palestine under Islamic rule. In India it has perhaps more ideal reasons. No ancient Indian dynasty ever succeeded in building a real pan-Indian empire, keeping a strict military and political control all over the subcontinent. A satisfactory political alternative was the choice to equate on the symbolic level the estates of a minor dynasty to the principal exotic sacred places being under the control of far more powerful dynasties. So we assist to the proliferation of nearly homonymous sacred places. In such a way from Kāśī arise one or more Uttarakāśīs (northern Kāśīs) in the Deccan. All the main epicāśīs are replicated on the territory giving life to a series of circuits more and more limited and circumscribed, and more and more relevant for popular devotion. The pilgrim who is not able to do his journey to a pan-Indian circuit, due either to the risks of the travel or to economic reasons or both, will be able to ripen the same karmic fruit through a substitute itinerary, a travel replicating on a lesser local scale the same journey of the real pilgrimage on pan-Indian scale. The classical example of this typology is the pācākroṭī pilgrimage of the five leagues (well, we will come back on this theme), but it is possible even to delineate a second grade replacement pilgrimage (we will see how this happens).

Second grade replacement pilgrimage exists in two main typologies. The first is a physical one: the pilgrim who is not able to complete a pan-Indian circuit will follow an alternative local circuit, for example the pācākroṭī one within the urban complex of Kāśī. A pilgrim who cannot cover the pācākroṭī circuit will visit the Pācākroṭī temple (Xth century CE), a sanctuary whose icons represent in a lesser scale all the one hundred and eight stations of the circuit. The second type is an ideal one: the pilgrim who accomplishes the ritual circumambulation (pīṇḍikā) of his spiritual master (guru) ripens the same fruit as if he had accomplished the physical journey to all the sacred places he desired to visit. Finally, it is even possible to put in effect a replacement pilgrimage simply evoking in one's own mind the name of the place one intends to visit.

Interior disposition

Interior disposition is the essential component of pilgrimage, often ~~is~~ more important than the selected goal of the journey. The preparation of the travel is mostly studied in order to reinforce in the pilgrim the firm resolution and the complete awareness of the correct mental and spiritual attitude useful for the journey. Sometimes the very choice of the destination has the aim to strengthen the firmness of mind. For example it is possible to choose willingly a ~~very~~ ^{remote} ~~site~~ ^{place} difficult to reach for environmental reasons, for the risks and costs of the itinerary, in order to show one's firm determination to undertake the venture. Another important feature of the interior disposition of the pilgrim is the ~~peaceful~~ ^{peaceful} acceptance of the loosening of all the obligations bound to the ~~castal~~ ^{castal} segregational system. During the travel it will simply be unrealistic to respect all the bounds of the ~~var.a and j•ti~~ ^{var.a and j•ti} system, the system of the social groups hierarchically ~~ordained~~ ^{ordained}. On the contrary, during the travel all the temporary links between the ~~leaves~~ ^{leaves} will be naturally reinforced. For a tacit agreement the pilgrims will get together ~~multi-coloured~~ ^{multi-coloured} crowd in occasion of the mass meetings such as ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~umbhamel~~ ^{umbhamel}. During these mass meetings, involving millions of people, promiscuity is unavoidable, and even temporary cohabitation and sharing of meals. The obsessive will to preserve segregation in order to avoid reciprocal contamination between different social groups is simply no more possible within the context of pilgrimage: people are no more separated, they must temporarily mingle.

Both cohabitation and sharing of meals ~~are~~ ^{are} common practice during pilgrimage. Both are strictly in contrast with the practice of ~~segregation~~ ^{segregation} usual in ancient Indian society, obsessed by the need to avoid the mixing of social groups, in order to preserve the natural purity of the superior ones from the contamination arising from any contact with the impurity of the inferior ones. So perhaps we may guess that one of the goals of pilgrimage is exactly to loose at least temporarily some of the tensions deriving from the segregation. A temporary interruption of the segregatory rigidity could be obtained in different contexts, for example during ~~periodical~~ ^{periodical} festivals, such as the merry promiscuity usual during the spring festival named ~~hed~~ ^{hed}, the so called feast of colours, celebrated with the throw of coloured powders.

Humility is the main mood of interior disposition. This mood is best revealed in the behaviour consisting in prostration. The pilgrim's body bows down to earth while proceeding in his way, and the journey consists in an uninterrupted series of prostrations, using his own body to measure the distance towards the goal of the travel. The foot are put where in the preceding moment the front was situated, and so on and so on. Interior disposition finds its way in an exterior mode of behaviour.

Macrocosm and microcosm

Our concepts of macrocosm and microcosm correspond moreless to ~~concepts~~ ^{concepts} of ~~brahm•...â and pi...•...â~~ ^{brahm•...â and pi...•...â}. ~~Brahm•...â, the "egg of Brahman...•, is the iconological representation of the cosmos in an embryonic stage, enclosed within a shell containing in it the whole of the world. Pi...•...â, the "egg made with food", refers to the sacrificial bolus, pi...â, a sort of vegetarian meatball made with pressed cooked rice, used as the main offer during funeral rites, in order to allow the deceased (pita) to become an ancestor (pita) in the hereafter. To call the human microcosm pi...•...â means to make reference to the lasting link binding together the living and the dead (through the practice of funeral and postfuneral rites), but even to the fact that human body is~~

made with food (and ancestor body is made with funeral offer), and that the original prenatal form of the body, the embryo, is an undifferentiated mass of flesh, from which different limbs will evolve in the due course of time, the egg shape of the indistinct embryonic mass.

Just within the body of the yogin a number of correspondences can be traced with sacred places, with divine and semidivine beings, and with the subtle elements of the exterior world. So the axis mundi the Meru Mountain in the exterior world, corresponds in the human body with the spinal column; the seven worlds (loka) correspond with seven wheels of energy (cakṛa), the earthly rivers correspond with the channels (nāḍī) where vital breaths flow, starting with prāṇa, the seven circular continents (dvīpa) of puranic cosmology correspond with the seven bodily tissues (chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and lastly sperm in the male and menstrual blood in the female). Lastly, to the cosmic conscious principle in the macrocosm, the so called 'Golden embryo', Hiraṇyagarbha, corresponds within human body the individual conscious principle, prajñā. The difference between the ordinary people and the yogin is simply this: the yogin has full awareness of all these correspondences, ordinary people does not have it.

In this perspective, in order to fulfill a pilgrimage is not strictly necessary to move from the place where one is situated, and for the ascetic it is not strictly necessary to move out of himself. All is literary and symbolically within oneself, in one's own body. The practice of pilgrimage can be read as a sort of interior journey aiming to the discovery of one's own interior self, through such practices as the mystical superimposition (nyāsa). Nyāsa is a tantric meditative practice consisting in the ritual establishment of different meditative supports or tutelary deities within the very same body of the adept. The devotee may use the names of the single deities, or in place of them a series of corresponding formulas consisting in syllables (kṛā, var. ā) from the Sanskrit syllabary, or even a series of lists of temples and sanctuaries, in order to allocate the different potentialities (invoked within the desired areas of one's own body. So in the tantric milieu the meditation on the body replaces the practice of pilgrimage because the strict net of equivalences between macrocosm and microcosm makes the pilgrimage simply unnecessary: what is outside is equated with what is within.

Preparation and goals

The preparation of the pilgrimage tends to underline the pilgrim's interior disposition. Pilgrimage's goals may be as various as possible. For example they represent the remedial action of a damage (illness either of the pilgrim or of one of his relatives, infertility of the pilgrim's wife or daughter, a modest entity ritual transgression); the fulfillment of a vow (healing from an illness, unhoped conception after a lot of unsuccessful attempts). The distance of the sanctuary chosen for the pilgrimage is directly proportional either to the importance of the damage or to the importance of the grace received. The main preparatory practices involve the ritual shaving of the head, representing the temporary equation of the pilgrim with the renouncer (śrī), the purificatory practice of the fasting; the firm resolution to reach the goal of the journey only travelling on foot, avoiding as far as possible all sorts of more comfortable and swift means of transport.

The ritual shaving of the head represents for the pilgrim the acceptance of an ordeal that will make him perfectly recognizable as an individual engaged in a severe path of purification.

The shaving of the head equates temporarily the pilgrim with the renouncer, the *śramaṇa*, who has definitely renounced to the world and to the whole of worldly life. The pilgrim will come back to the world after the pilgrimage has been completed.

Meetings (kumbhamela)

Mass meetings (up to twenty millions of pilgrims) are one of the most famous features of Indian pilgrimage. One of the most important mass meeting, surely the most famous in Western countries, is the meeting of the *kumbhamela*, referring to the myth of the churning of the milky ocean in order to obtain the liquor of immortality (*amṛta*). During the churning of the ocean four drops of *amṛta* fell on the surface of the earth. In each one of the places where the drops fell arose a sacred city, respectively Prayāga (today, Allahabad), Haridvār (today Hardwar), Nāsik (today, Nasik), Ujjayinī (today, Ujjain). The meeting is an itinerant periodical one, and it is held every twelve years in Prayāga in its full form, every six years in Haridvār in its halfed (*ardha*) form, according to an irregular periodicity following complex astrological calculations for the minor editions being held in Nāsik and Ujjayinī. The organization of this event is delicate but uncompromising, in charge of a designated committee in accordance with municipal authorities. An imponent tent city is mounted all sorts of services (drinking water, sewers, electricity and so on). The main problem is how to regulate the afflux of the pilgrims to the river, because the privilege to enter in the flow before any other group is a sign of the greatest distinction, hardly debated between the different sects of ascetics; the lay people enter only after the last group of ascetics has completed the ritual bath.

Ritual nakedness is considered as a symbol of inner purity and austerity in contrast to ascetic orders accepting the use of dresses: so the naked ones (*śrāṇas*), recognizable as devotees of Śiva by their emblems (the trident, *triśūla*, and the necklace of seeds *śaiva* *ganitruṣ* *rudrak*), generally enter the flow before every other sect. After the ascetics the lay people have access to the river in order to complete the ritual bath. All the inconveniences of the pilgrimage (the hard travel, the cohabitation in the tent city, the difficulty to obtain food and drinking water and so on) are cancelled by the culmination of the pilgrimage experience, consisting in the sacred bath in the flow of the sacred river. This occasion is very rare, because it corresponds to a precise astrological moment, which all the stars, planets and lunar houses are aligned in order to ensure the most propitious result of the practice. The imponent mass of human beings seems a spontaneous flux to an external observer, but as a matter of fact it is strictly regulated by appointed authorities, and incidents are sporadic.

According to tradition, in Prayāga three rivers merge, two of them being visible, the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā, the third one being invisible because it flows underground, the Sarasvatī. In effect the site has the name of *trivenī*. In the triple braid, the tress made by three threads, the symbolic meaning addicted to the original meaning of the term involves the combination of the three attributes (*guṇa*) constituting the pure object principle (*prākṛti*), that is brightness, dynamism and stasis (*śattva* *rajas*, *tamaḥ* these being bound respectively to the symbolic colour white, red and black), or the interlacing of the three channels (the term that etymologically may mean *antar* *alīa* *river*) where the vital breath flows giving life to the body (*prāṇa* and *apāṇa* interlacing on both sides of the spinal column represented by the central channel, *śūṣumnā*).

Circuits (parikramā)

Each and every field (kṣētra) or sacred complex contains within itself each and every sacred place of India, through a mechanism of replacement pilgrimage mechanism not at all theoretical or abstract, but really with specific environmental correspondences. For example a modest elevation may recall and symbolize, so it may stand for a mountain range; a creek may evoke, and so it may stand for, a river, and so on. In such a way a real replica of all the sacred geography of the subcontinent takes place in a single site. The single replacement kṣētra are linked together by a circuit or itinerary (parikramā), covered by the pilgrim with the full awareness that he is sharing a wider path, not a local but a panindian route. The circuit is organized in such a way to represent a real ritual circumambulation (parikramā), a circular route covered clockwise, keeping every sacred site at one's own right side. At extended fields involve even alternative itineraries, varying according to the number of days of the travel, to the difficulties of the route, to the different sacred sites being replicated in the path, and so on. The pilgrim will choose the itinerary most fit to his own economic, physical attitudes and capabilities.

The mythical archetype of these itineraries is represented by the circuit of the sacred fords effected by the five Pāṇḍava brothers during their year of exile in the forest, narrated in the third major book of the Mahābhārata. On the other hand the theological archetype is represented by the triumphal circuit in the four cardinal points (digvijaya), covered by a spiritual master who has defeated in a series of public dialectical debates his opponents, members of rival schools. Every defeated master has to follow the guru who has defeated him, bringing with him his own disciples, who become all members of the winning school. So the digvijaya is really a sort of triumphal march, during which the parade of the new and old disciples becomes more and more numerous. The classical example is the digvijaya of the guru of absolute nondualistic vedānta (kevaladvaitavāda), Śaṅkara (Śaṅkara, Śaṅkara...c...rya, active between VII and VIII century CE).

Amongst the many places visited by Śaṅkara during his digvijaya we may count the seats of sankarite coenobia (śaṅkara) founded by the master: Dharmarakṣita, Badarīnatha, etc. Every center of spiritual life is linked to a specific disciple of the master (except for), and to a specific meditative formula, a 'great dictum' (mahāvākya), respectively 'tat tvam asi' thou art that (Chāndogyaupaniṣad 6,8,7), 'ayam ātmā brahma' this very self is brahma (Māṇḍūkyaupaniṣad 2), 'prajānaṁ brahma' brahma is knowledge (Aitareyaupaniṣad 3,5,3), 'ahaṁ brahma smi' I am brahma (Bṛhadāraṇyakaupaniṣad 1,4,10), and we may add as a fifth 'tat sat' yes, that is reality (Bhagavadgītā 17,23)

Bibliography

- Sabita Acharya, *Pilgrimage in Indian Civilization*, Manak Publications, New Delhi 1997
- Samarendra Narayana Arya, *History of Pilgrimage in Ancient India, AD 300-1200*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi 2004
- Hans Bakker (ed.), *The History of Sacred Places in India as Reflected in Traditional Literature, Papers on Pilgrimage in South Asia*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1990
- Hans Bakker (ed.), *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interests*, Forsten, Groningen 1992
- Agehananda Bharat, *Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition*, in *History of Religions* 3/1 (1963), pp. 1-367
- Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India, a Study of Cultural Geography*, Thomson Press Ltd., Delhi / University of California Press, Berkeley 1973
- J.H. Davis, *Immortal India*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 4 vols., Bombay 1957 (I), 1959 (II), 1960 (III), 1961 (IV)
- Michel Delahoutre, Guy Deleury, Arindam Roy, Jean Varenne, *Kumbha Mela, Pellegrinaggio indiano*, Jaca Book, Milano 2001
- Diana L. Eck, *Banaras, City of Light*, Knopf, Princeton 1982, Columbia University Press, New York 1999
- Diana L. Eck, *The Imagined Landscape. Patterns in the Construction of Hindu Sacred Geography*, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32/2 (1998), pp. 1-188
- J. Ensink, *Problems of the Study of Pilgrimage in India*, in *Indologica Taurinensia* 2 (1976), pp. 37-77
- Anne Feldhaus, *Connected Places. Religion, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India*, Oxford University Press, New York 2003
- Martin Gaenzle, Jörg Gagnagel, *Visualizing Space in Banaras, Images, Maps and the Practice of Representation*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2006
- J.C. Galey, *L'universel dans la localité. Implications sociologiques du pèlerinage en Inde*, in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 211/3 (1994), pp. 259-296
- Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Heilige Stätten Indiens*, Der Indische Kulturkreis in Einzeldarstellungen, München 1928
- B.N. Goswami, *The Records Kept by Priests at Centres of Pilgrimage as a Source of Social and Economic History*, in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 3 (1966), pp. 173-184
- Subhadra Sen Gupta, *Tirtha, Holy Pilgrim Centres of the Hindus, Saptapuris & Char Dhamas*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi 2001
- Niels Gutschow, *Benares, The Sacred Landscape of Varanasi*, Edition Axel Menges, Stuttgart / London 2006
- Claude Jacques, *Les pèlerinages en Inde*, in AnneMarie Esnoul et al., *Sources Orientales 3, Les pèlerinages*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1960, pp. 159-177
- Makhan Jha, *Dimensions of Pilgrimage, an Anthropological Appraisal*, Kalita-India Publications, New Delhi 1985
- in *Kalyan* 31/1 (362), Tirthankar, Gitapres, Gorakhpur 1958
- Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 4 sez. 4, *Āchāryaśāstra*, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona 1953, 1973, pp. 552-587
- Krsna Kumar, *Bharat Tirtha Darshan*, Mangalik Prakashan, Varanasi 1984
- S.S.L. Malhotra, *Pilgrimage, a Journey and a Trek to the Himalayan Shrines of Badrinath, Kedarnath and Hemkund Sahib*, Trafford, Victoria/B.C. 2003
- M.A. Mehendale, *Mahabharata, A Cultural Index*, vol. 1 fasc.3, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune 1996
- Swami Pavitrana, *Pilgrimage and Fairs: their Bearing on Indian Life*, in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (cur. gen.), *Haridas Bhattacharyya (cur.) The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 4, *The Religions*, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta 1956, pp. 495-522
- Alberto Pelissero, *Induismo*, in Alberto Pelissero, Nicoletta Celli, Fabrizio Vecoli, Gabriele Mandel Khan, *Pellegrinaggi Electa*, Milano 2011, pp. 7-31
- Stefano Piana, *Le ...celebrazioni dei Santi nella tradizione religiosa dell'induismo*, in *Aevum* 53 (1979), fasc. 2, pp. 212-229
- Stefano Piana, *Il mito del Gange, Ganga-matmya*, Promolibri, Torino 1990
- Richard Salomon, *The Bridge to the Three Holy Cities*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1985
- Rana P.B. Singh, *Towards the Pilgrimage Archetype, the Pancakrosi Yatra of Banaras*, Indica, New Delhi 2002
- Rana P.B. Singh, R.L. Singh, *Cognizing Urban Landscape of Varanasi: a note on cultural synthesis*, in *The National Geographic Journal of India* 26 (34), Sept-Dec. 2008, pp. 113-123
- Rana P.B. Singh, *Cosmic Order and Cultural Astronomy: Sacred Cities of India*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2009
- Rana P.B. Singh (cur.), *Holy Places and Pilgrimages: Essays on India*, Shubhi Publications, New Delhi 2011
- Victor Turner, *The Center Out There: Pilgrimage as Goal*, in *History of Religions* 12 (1973), pp. 123-130
- Victor Turner, *Process, performance, and pilgrimage: a study in comparative symbolism*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi 1979